



TACIR *FAST FACTS*

Minimizing Risk Factors Key to Kindergarten Success

- **Kindergarten adds more to a child's math and reading ability than another year at home.**
- **All day programs produce greater gains than part day programs.**
- **Children with family risk factors gain nearly as much, but start farther behind—they need more than just kindergarten.**

"The kindergarten year marks a period of rapid change in the ways children think about themselves and the world around them. . .

Across this first year of schooling, children will acquire the knowledge and skills that will prove integral to their future success in school and in life."^{*}

Or not Some children are better prepared when they enter kindergarten, and those children are still better prepared when they exit kindergarten. Risk factors evaluated by researchers reporting on the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) include

- *mother's education less than high school,*
- *family utilization of welfare programs,*
- *single-parent family, and*
- *primary home language other than English.*

The fewer of these risk factors a child has, the better they do in math and reading at the beginning and at the end of kindergarten.

Overall, children gained ten percentile points in reading and eight percentile points in math. Children with two or more risk factors gained only nine points in reading and seven points in math—but at least they gained. These children ended kindergarten only two (math) or three (reading) points ahead of where children with no risk factors started kindergarten, placing them seven points behind their no-risk peers.*

Where would they be without kindergarten?

It cannot be said for certain, but information about children who began kindergarten at different ages may provide a clue. Those who were six entered kindergarten only two to four points ahead of those who were five and only four or five points ahead of those who were four.

All five- and six-year-olds gained ten points; four-year-olds gained nine. The five-year-olds ended kindergarten five to seven points ahead of where the

six-year-olds started, and the four-year-olds ended four or five points ahead of where the six-year-olds started. Obviously, children gain more in math and reading ability by attending kindergarten than by being kept out.

How much would they gain from two years of school prior to first grade?

Hard to say, but if the four-year-olds in this study gained nine points in a year, and the five-year-

olds gained ten points, then it seems likely that a single child allowed two years of schooling prior to first grade could gain as much as 19 points between age four and age six.

Based on the gains of children in the ECLS study, children starting first grade at age six with two years of schooling behind them could be as much as five points ahead of seven-year-olds with only one year of schooling behind them.

* Source: West, Jerry, Kristin Denton, Elizabeth M. Reany, *The Kindergarten Year—Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99*, Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, November 2000.

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2001023>.

What else do we know from this report about children with family risk factors?

Only that those with mothers who have college degrees *start kindergarten ahead* of where those whose mothers have less than high school *end kindergarten*. With such a huge disadvantage, these children need more than kindergarten.

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Related Publications:

- *Why pre-k?* A legislative staff briefing paper by the Office of Education Accountability, Comptroller of the Treasury, and the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (March 2001).
- *RAND Reports: Money Matters in Education Depending on How It's Spent*, a staff information report by the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (May 2001).

Implications for Tennessee—

The federal kindergarten year study just began two years ago, but already it indicates that kindergarten is essential, and pre-kindergarten may be key to the success of children from families with risk factors such as poverty and low parental education levels. The Governor proposed and the legislature enacted a bill in 2001 that would have put Tennessee on the road to providing pre-kindergarten to all children, but the bill was not funded. That legislation, known as the Education Reform Act of 2001, provided for

- a statewide reading initiative targeting schools with children scoring poorly on the state's reading tests,
- enhanced support for students at risk of failing the state's high school graduation exams, known as the Gateway Tests,
- improvements in professional development for teachers at all schools, and
- expansion of the pilot programs in early childhood education (pre-kindergarten) statewide.

The rationale for the Governor's program is as much an economic one as an educational one: Early failure is expensive to remedy and ultimately becomes a drain on the state's economy, which is why both local governments and the business community supported the legislation. The Act was not funded for the 2001-02 fiscal year and by law must be re-enacted and funded or it will become null and void.



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